

HISTORY OF
ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
MACON COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA



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The life of St. John's Episcopal Church, Nonah, North Carolina, really owes its existence, under God, to a young woman, Joanna Chipman, who was born in New York State. She came on a visit to her relatives, met a mountain man, Albert Siler, married him, and settled in the community outside Franklin, North Carolina. Through her tenacious devotion to the Church of England in Canada and later to the Episcopal Church here, a clergyman of the church, Mr. John Archibald Deal, was sent to initiate work. The following is his story of the beginning of St. John's:

In July 1877 I came over from Murphy, where I was stationed, and gave two services and administered the Holy Communion, using Mt. Zion Methodist Church for the same.

"Sept. 27 I moved to Macon County, taught school, and gave services on Sunday. I boarded with Mr. Albert Siler. Harry and Laura, two of his children, had been confirmed in Aug., making 5 children, the father and mother, 7 in all who had been confirmed, and so far as I have learned were the only communicants in this county when I came.

"Our services were held in the Privet Schoolhouse Sunday a.m. and p.m. Other days I taught and visited.

"About a year after this we gave up this schoolhouse and with the aid of the brethren I built a log schoolhouse on a parcel of land which I had bought. The first person baptized was Caleb J. Dalrymple, aged 45. He, with J. M. Gillespie and his wife, and W. R. Stallcup and his wife constituted my confirmation class in 1878.

"The schoolhouse proving inadequate, we began in 1880 to build St. John's Church. Some of the brethren gave a little lumber, our Mr. A. L. Canton gave a piece of land to pay for glass and paint, and Miss Fanny E. Siler gave in money and board for the carpenters \$100 (One Hundred Dollars).

"But this was only a fragment of the cost. No one here knows how to erect such a building as we wanted. Sawmills were poor and lumber was high. No planing mills in the county. So I went to Balt(imore) to beg money for the building. At

length it was completed, paid for and consecrated in 1881, by Bishop Lyman.

"I opened up other stations, built other churches, and so was compelled to give only a small part of my time to St. John's. In 1891 the Bishop sent an assistant who only remained two months.

"From Dec. 1891 to Nov. 1894, I raised from my friends North about \$1450.00, which I paid to Rev. J. W. Barker for assisting me in the work, chiefly in giving more frequent services to St. John's. I would gladly append to these few statements the details and exact cost of building St. John's but my records were destroyed by fire in Franklin when my office was burned.

Signed this Aug. 15, 1895.

J. A. Deal

Missionary in Charge"

From the beginning, the work at St. John's radiated to Franklin, where St. Agnes Church was soon built; to Highlands, where the Church of the Transfiguration was built; to Cullowhee, where the work at St. David's was established; and to country communities like Prentiss, Rainbow Springs, Tusquitee, and especially to St. Cyprian's Church for colored people, just outside of Franklin. The work varied according to the needs of the communities.

At St. John's, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Siler gave two acres of land for the church site. The first wedding held in the new church was for my parents: my father, Alfred Morgan, to Fanny Siler. The first funeral in the churchyard was that of a local Indian Chief, Chutthasotee, and his wife Cunstagih. The story of this couple has been of interest to many. My great grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. William Siler, settled in the Valley of the Cartoogechaye about 1818, when it was Cherokee Indian country. Twenty years later took place the removal of the Indians by the Government on the Trail of Tears to what was then Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. All the Indians who could not escape were taken, including the local chief and his wife. That couple, however, escaped and found their way back into the Valley. Having

known the William Silers as friends, they went to them for protection. The Silers took them in, and in order that the Government might not have the power to move them again, deeded to the couple a small tract of land. Being therefore real estate owners, they could not legally be evicted again. They stayed there as long as they lived, being ministered to in many ways by Albert Siler, especially in spiritual ways like Bible reading, prayers and hymns. Then, when Mr. Deal came, he took over this work. When Chief Chuttahsotee died in 1878, his request was granted that he might be buried with the white man's burial. When he died, his wife, Cunstagih, said to her son, "I am going with your father when the sun goes down." "Mother," he said, "you are not sick." "No, but I am going with your father." So she died a natural death and was buried with him.

St. John's was never a large congregation, but it was a seed bed from which the church work spread over the area. Mr. Deal continued the work almost to the end of his ministry. As he says in his short sketch, he lived with my grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Siler, until he could get his log house built. He taught what were called "subscription schools" to eke out a living. His last recorded ministrations at St. John's were in 1910. After that, the work of the church in the area declined and in most instances was abandoned. Many people moved from the community, and the authorities of the Diocese, having the modern idea that the country people should go into town for the services of the church, and the church building being in bad repair, allowed it to be torn down. Things looked desperate for St. John's: no church building, no care for the cemetery, and the members of the congregation left to shift for themselves. Most of the graves were moved to the cemetery in Franklin. Some of the loyal members retained their membership but joined with churches of other denominations in their activities and support. They stated that they did not "join" these other churches but still belonged to the Episcopal Church, which had deserted them.

Having been baptized in the old St. John's Church after my birth just across the road in 1885, I never lost my affection for it. Having heard, when I was working in the Diocese of Upper South Carolina, that the Trustees of the Diocese of Western North

Carolina were expecting to sell the land, I wrote asking them not to sell it, but if they did, to give me the opportunity of buying it. They abandoned their plan. I felt responsible. When I could get a few days' vacation, I would come and clear the underbrush to insure that the property did not return to wilderness. Finally, I could resist no longer what I felt and still feel was the call of God to come back and revive as much as I could of the church which Mr. Deal had worked so hard to establish. I came back in 1940. As I was working one day on the grounds where the church had stood, I happened to notice the change that was in my trousers pocket, took it out and noted that there were several pennies. I did a childish trick. I said to myself, "I will put these pennies aside and not spend any pennies until St. John's is rebuilt." From that time on, the project was constantly in my mind. Any gifts I received that were not for a specific purpose I added to the accumulating pennies in the bank. In those days, the National Forest authorities would give to country churches logs to help build their churches. They gave some to me. There were white pines on the grounds which had completed their growth. I had those cut, sawed, dried and finished for the paneling for the inside of the church. I did whatever work I was capable of doing, in carpentry, sawing of shingles, planning, and got others to help. The stained glass windows were given by friends in Columbia who had lost a son in the war. A few articles from the old church I discovered were still in existence. Some had been loaned to other churches. The baptismal font, made by a cabinet maker at St. Cyprian's, was returned. The simple bishop's chair was found and retrieved. A part of the lectern was recovered and restored by a retired friend. The handmade altar, which had been in the Church of the Ascension, Rainbow Springs, was given to us. The bell, which had been in the old church, was returned to us and a belfry was built for it at the entrance to the church. Several of the graves which had been removed were those of my own family. The gravestones were left scattered about. (I would not consent to having my mother's grave and two infants moved.) When I got ready to begin building, I asked the relatives, as I had done before, what they planned to do with the stones. They did not know. I then asked, "May I have them to put in the foundation of the church?" They readily agreed. I put the

stone of my grandmother at the front corner, since she was the one responsible in the beginning for the existence of the work.

The first St. John's Church was called "St. John's, Nonah." Nonah is the Cherokee Indian name for an evergreen tree and was the name of the local postoffice when the original St. John's was built. The new church was called "St. John's, Cartoogechaye." Cartoogechaye is also Cherokee and means "the town over beyond" and is the name of the Valley where St. John's stands.

We had our first service in the new church in 1945. Before my retirement in 1957, I held such services as I could at St. John's along with services at ten other churches for which I was responsible. Since my retirement St. John's has been my chief love. Again, our congregations have been small but the work has been rewarding. Many people love the spot and the church, come to visit it during the week and on Sundays, especially during the summer, turn to it for weddings and for burials and have a great affection for it.

Before retirement we discovered that at Rainbow Springs, just across the mountain, there was no church of any kind. We held services when possible Sunday afternoons in one room of a former public schoolhouse which still remained. The people made repeated requests for a church. We still owned a four-acre plot, where the church had been. After gathering field stones and getting the interest of others, we built in 1962 an open-air chapel. It has a stone floor, a stone wall eighteen inches high, a stone altar with a marble top, a roof supported by locust posts, and a wooden cross hanging over the altar. It is called the Chapel of the Ascension, Rainbow Springs. During the summer we conduct afternoon services there.

As we have grown in years we have realized two material needs. First, to insure that the cemetery is not abandoned, we have established the St. John's, Cartoogechaye, Cemetery Trust Fund. We had a gift that enabled us to start the Fund with \$1,500. When people have loved ones buried and are able to pay, we charge \$100 for each space. The principal sum is not to be spent but we have almost enough in interest to take care of the cemetery and any needed repairs on the church.

Finally, realizing that with my infirmities of sight and hearing and age I cannot continue much longer, we have established a fund to try to insure the continuance of the work at St. John's and the Chapel of the Ascension. We call this fund the St. John's, Nonah, Foundation. Again we started the fund with \$1,500, from the church treasury. It amounts now to almost twenty thousand dollars. The principal of this fund is likewise not to be spent, but the interest is to be used in connection with the church's future. We hope that another man will be willing to come after retirement, or as a worker-priest, and carry on without any stipend, as I have done. We have received gifts for this fund all the way from one dollar to a thousand dollars. We hope it will continue to grow.

We should add a footnote. We speak of these funds. St. John's has always tried to emphasize the spiritual life of the church. We do not "take up collection" at the services. We have a handmade pewter plate on the organ. Whoever will may place a contribution on this plate at the end of the service. We also have a "money box" at the door of the church and many visitors, during the week or on Sunday, place contributions there.

The work at St. John's has been the greatest joy of my life.

A. RUFUS MORGAN

"Nonah"

Franklin, North Carolina

May 1974